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## Carl Jung and the Archetypes

“...when a living organism is cut off from its roots, it loses a connection with the foundation of its existence and must necessarily perish.”

*Carl Jung, Aion*

Carl Jung dedicated his life to a single goal, which as he notes in his autobiography, was to “penetrate into the secret of the personality.” (MDR) To accomplish this task, he adopted the dictum of the great Roman poet Terrence as his intellectual duty: “nothing human is alien to me.” He probed the depths of the psyche like few before, or few since, and what he came to realize was just how little we know about the nature of our own psyche.

“Our times, characterized as they are by an almost total disorientation in regard to the ends of human existence, stand in need, above all else, of a vast amount of psychological knowledge.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 18*

In this video we explore some of what Jung learned about the inner world of the psyche and examine the meaning behind his famous claim that we must strive to make the unconscious conscious.

“Everything in the unconscious seeks outward manifestation, and the personality too desires to evolve out of its unconscious conditions and to experience itself as a whole.”

*Carl Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

Psyche is a term that has been used to refer to many things; from ‘life’, to ‘breath’, to ‘soul’, to ‘spirit’. But Jung uses this term in a more modern way, to refer to the mind in its most comprehensive sense. The psyche, in other words, is the inner world of mental occurrences and when Jung refers to something as psychic what he means is that it is experiential in nature.

Jung divided the elements of the psyche into two main categories, those that are conscious and those that are unconscious.

“We may suppose that human personality consists of two things: first, consciousness ... and second, an indefinitely large hinterland of unconscious psyche.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 11*

The elements of the psyche that possess the quality of consciousness are those that we are aware of, that are manipulable by acts of volition, can be reflected upon, and connected to other conscious thoughts, ideas, or impressions to form webs of cognitive associations. Unconscious elements of the psyche exist below the threshold of awareness, are uncontrollable by the will, incapable of being reflected upon, or as Jung wrote: “*I define the unconscious as the totality of all psychic phenomena that lack the quality of consciousness.*” (*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 8*)

The boundary between consciousness and the unconscious is fluid and ever changing. There does not exist a realm that is conscious and a separate realm that is unconscious, there exists the single realm of the psyche. To help us understand the difference between consciousness and unconsciousness, we can use the analogy of a spotlight that moves around a dark stage: The spotlight represents conscious awareness and the stage is the totality of the psyche. When the spotlight illuminates certain mental contents or processes, they become conscious, when it moves away from them, they return to the dark state of the unconscious. Or as Jung explains:

“From the scientific standpoint [unconsciousness] is simply a quality of certain psychic phenomena. One cannot even say that there is a definite class of psychic phenomena which regularly and under all circumstances have the quality of being unconscious. Anything may be, or become, unconscious. Anything you forget, or anything from which you divert your attention until it is forgotten, falls into the unconscious.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 17*

The vast majority of the psyche exists in a state of unconsciousness: “*Consciousness, no matter how extensive it may be, must always remain the smaller circle within the greater circle of the unconscious, an island surrounded by the sea...*” (*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 16*)

Jung divided the contents of the unconscious into two main categories – the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious consists of elements that are a product of our individual history. It is composed of contents that could have been conscious, or that once were conscious, but which we have intentionally, or unintentionally, relegated to an unconscious state. Some elements of the personal unconscious are events we have simply forgotten about, or experiences that were not significant enough to register in conscious awareness. While other elements of the personal unconscious were repressed from consciousness due to their distressing nature or their incompatibility with our desired self-image. Or as Jung explains:

“The personal unconscious contains everything forgotten or repressed or otherwise subliminal that has been acquired by the individual consciously or unconsciously. This material has an unmistakably personal stamp.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 17*

The unconscious, however, is not solely a depository of repressed, suppressed, or forgotten contents from our past. It also contains contents that are innate, rather than personally acquired, and which are a product of the history of our species, rather than of our personal history, or as Jung writes:

“...this personal unconscious rests upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn. This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious. I have chosen the term “collective” because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals.”

*Carl Jung, Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*

Jung called the contents of the collective unconscious the archetypes. The “...archetypes,” he explains “[are] universal and inherited patterns which, taken together, constitute the structure of the unconscious.” (Carl Jung, Symbols of Transformation) Each of us is born with a set of archetypes, just as we are born with a set of bodily organs. And just as the organs predispose us to certain forms of physical interaction with our environment, the archetypes predispose us to certain forms of mental interaction, that is certain patterns of psychic experience, in the face of life’s challenges.

“...the archetypes are the forms or river-beds along which the current of psychic life has always flowed.”

*Carl Jung, Symbols of Transformation*

Jung often referred to the archetypes as the psychic equivalent to the instincts – the instincts unconsciously pattern our physical response to stimuli, while the archetypes pattern our psychological and emotional response, or as Jung explains:

“The inborn mode of acting has long been known as instinct, and for the inborn mode of psychic apprehension I have proposed the term archetype.”

*Carl Jung, Psychological Types*

Jung believed that for much of humanity’s history, we were primarily guided by the unconsciousness of our instincts and archetypes. Consciousness, on the other hand, is a relatively recent phenomenon and it was from the unconscious that consciousness arose, or as Jung writes:

“The psyche is not of today; its ancestry goes back many millions of years. Individual consciousness is only the flower and the fruit of a season, sprung from the perennial rhizome beneath the earth...”

*Carl Jung, Symbols of Transformation*

Or as he explains in volume 18 of his Collected Works:

“. . . [the unconscious] is the basis and precondition of all consciousness. . . It is psychic life before, during, and after consciousness.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 18*

Why consciousness emerged from the unconscious is one of life’s great mysteries and much debate surrounds this question. But what is undeniable is that when it did emerge, it dramatically changed the trajectory of our species. Consciousness transformed us from an animal guided by the surety of instincts and archetypes to a species that can doubt, question, and reflect, or as X writes in *Decoding Jung*:

“Instinctual animals face no dilemmas or difficult choices; instead instinct always provides them with one, clear path forward. They don’t second-guess themselves, regret past choices or feel anxiety about future predicaments. By operating purely instinctually they are at one with nature and feel no inner tension. Only we, conscious human beings, do all those things, for [as Jung wrote] “we have turned away from the certain guidance of instinct and are handed over to fear”. Consciousness is what makes us suffer.”

*Bernardo Kastrup, Decoding Jung’s Metaphysics*

Or as Jung explains:

“Man started from an unconscious state and has ever striven for greater consciousness. The development of consciousness is the burden, the suffering, and the blessing of mankind.”

*Carl Jung, “Men, Women, and God” (1955), C. G. Jung Speaking*

While consciousness paves the way for suffering, it also grants us immense power. Unconscious processes help us react to life and survive in familiar environments, but consciousness helps us deal with the new, navigate unfamiliar situations, and manipulate the world in novel ways. Consciousness allows us to think flexibly, to focus on a single problem for an extended period of time, to anticipate future possibilities, to plan, and to ruminate on past events. The power of consciousness, in other words, has created an animal that can adapt to the world like no other, or as Jung note:

“The essence of conscious processes is adaptation.”

*Carl Jung, Symbols of Transformation*

But consciousness does more than magnify our ability to adapt to the conditions of the world. It also shapes how we experience the world. For we can, to a degree, choose what occupies the spotlight of our awareness and what we focus on sculpts our experiential world. We can also deploy our conscious attention in a variety of ways: we can focus it in a broad or narrow manner, or in an engaged or disengaged manner. Different modes of consciousness, deployed to different objects in the inner or outer world, create drastically different forms of experience. Or as Iain McGilchrist wrote in *The Matter With Things*:

“[Attention] is the manner in which our consciousness is disposed towards whatever else exists. The choice we make of how we dispose our consciousness is the ultimate creative act: it renders the world what it is.”

*Iain McGilchrist, The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*

Or as Jung notes:

“The world itself becomes a reflection of the psyche.”

*Carl Jung, The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1932 (26 October, 1932)*

In addition to rendering the world what it is, the psyche also renders our personality what it is. How we dispose our consciousness, what we are conscious of, what we leave in the darkness of the unconscious, and our ability, or lack thereof, to connect to the archetypes of the collective unconscious are the prime factors that shape who we are. To change our personality, therefore, Jung believed we must change our relationship with the unconscious. For if we cognitively connect to, reflect on, and integrate into conscious awareness elements of the unconscious, we broaden the scope of consciousness, change the manner in which we dispose it, and move toward the ideal of psychological health which Jung called wholeness.

“... the unconscious contents made an essential contribution to the completion of my personality,” wrote Jung in his autobiography.

*Carl Jung, Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

The first step in tapping into the powers and potentialities of the unconscious requires that we shine the light of awareness on elements of the personal unconscious – specifically the ones we have repressed due to the belief that they were of a disagreeable nature. These elements, which are often weaknesses and character flaws, Jung called the shadow side of our personality. The shadow is among the most accessible parts of the unconscious, as its elements were at one time conscious. For most people their personal shadow can be revealed through honest self-reflection and a willingness to recognize that we are never as moral or virtuous as we like to believe, or as Jung wrote: “*With a little self-criticism one can see through the shadow...*” (*Carl Jung, Aion*)

Very few people take the step of confronting the shadow and instead continue to deny their flaws and weaknesses. But denial of the shadow does not make our faults disappear, it allows them to operate outside of our control. It is, therefore, far better to accept our weaknesses and faults and in the process temper their negative effects on our life, or as Jung explains:

“If one can accept one’s sin one can live with it. If one cannot accept it, one has to suffer the inevitable consequences.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 18*

Work with his psychiatry patients led Jung to recognize another benefit of confronting the contents of the personal unconscious. Often we repress strengths of our character, that we were mistakenly led to believe were weaknesses, due to a poor upbringing or corrupt social values. Shining a light on the personal unconscious allows us to integrate these elements back into our conscious sense of self and in the process develop a greater personality.

“The personal unconscious is really something very relative, and its circle can be restricted and become so much narrower that it touches zero. It is quite thinkable that a

man can develop his consciousness to such an extent that he can say: I am a man; I count nothing human alien to me.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 18*

A third reason for confronting the personal unconscious, is that only after we descend into this region of the psyche can we mine the deeper elements of the collective unconscious, or as Jung wrote:

“This “personal unconscious” must always be dealt with first, that is, made conscious, otherwise the gateway to the collective unconscious cannot be opened.”

*Carl Jung, Psychology and Alchemy*

Tapping into the collective unconscious grants us access to the deep wisdom of our species’ past. Jung believed that innumerable archetypes exist that can guide us through the common challenges that we face in our shared humanity. Some of the most common archetypes include the archetype of the mother, father, youth, old age, and hero, religious archetypes that can help us connect to the divine, as well as what Jung called the archetype of the Self which facilitates the attainment of psychological wholeness.

“Although the changing situations of life must appear infinitely various to our way of thinking,” writes Jung “their possible number never exceed certain natural limits; they fall into more or less typical patterns that repeat themselves over and over again. The archetypal structure of the unconscious corresponds to the average run of events. . . When therefore a distressing situation arises, the corresponding archetype will be constellated in the unconscious...Its passing over into consciousness is felt as an illumination, a revelation, or a “saving idea.””

*Carl Jung, Symbols of Transformation*

Sometimes a pivotal stage in our development, such as standing on the precipice of a new chapter in life, or the facing of a great challenge, will spontaneously constellate the needed archetypes in the unconscious. When this occurs an individual is gripped by emotionally charged ideas and intense impulses of attraction and aversion that guide him toward the aims of the archetype. The problem, however, is that modern man’s mode of consciousness impedes the spontaneous activation of the archetypes. Whether it be our compulsive use of technology which narrows our attentional field and blocks out awareness of the contents emerging from the unconscious, our obsession with our self-image and social validation which leaves the shadow blocking the door to the collective unconscious, or the lack of participation in activities that can broaden conscious awareness, such as art, religion or time spent in nature – modern man is dangerously disconnected from the collective unconscious.

“This function [of the unconscious becoming conscious] works automatically, but, owing to the notorious atrophy of instinct in civilized man, it is often too weak to swing his one-sided orientation of consciousness in a new direction against the pressures of society. Therefore, artificial aids have always been needed to bring the healing forces of the unconscious into play.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 10*

To connect to the unconscious modern man needs to strengthen the symbol producing function of the psyche. For it is through the manifestation of symbols, or what amount to psychic images thrown up by the unconscious, that we become aware of the archetypes and when a group of these symbols are constellated in consciousness they point to the meaning and purpose of the archetype.

“A term or image is symbolic when it means more than it denotes or expresses. It has a wider “unconscious” aspect – an aspect that can never be precisely defined or fully explained.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 18*

For example, Jung believed that the mandala symbol was generated by the archetype of psychological wholeness and signified unity and totality. Often this symbol would manifest during times of psychic chaos or confusion and help return order to a fragmented psyche. Jung even noted that one of his patients, who was bordering on a psychosis, resorted to spontaneously drawing mandalas and by externalizing in art an internal archetypal symbol, she brought the symbol to conscious awareness, and this helped return her to psychological health. The symbols of an archetype, therefore, when manifest in consciousness, acts as an agent of self-transformation and sometimes the effect of these symbols is so powerful they force us down a life path we would not have considered prior to the constellation of the archetype.

“Whenever [the archetype] clothes itself in suitable symbols (which is not always the case), it seizes hold of the individual in a startling way, creating a condition amounting almost to possession, the consequences of which may be incalculable.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 18*

One of the best aids for connecting the collective unconscious is the dream. When we dream consciousness weakens and creates the ideal situation for the emergence of archetypal symbols. Most people, however, pay little attention to their dreams and quickly forget them soon after waking up. Jung advised that those who wish to connect to the unconscious, should record their dreams, reflect on their meaning, and attempt to decipher any symbols that may appear in them. Or as Jung explains:

“I have spent more than half a century investigating natural symbols, and I have come to the conclusion that dreams and their symbols are not stupid and meaningless. On the contrary, dreams provide you with the most interesting information if only you take the trouble to understand their symbols.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 18*

In addition to dreams, religious practices are another aid for tapping into the contents of the collective unconscious. Meditation, chants, hymns, and contemplative prayer are practices which help counteract the narrowing of the attentional field that impedes the expression of archetypal symbols. Religious rituals are collective experiences that can help activate the emergence of archetypes into conscious awareness. While reading holy scripture, mythology, fairytales or other great works of literature, grants us knowledge of how to interpret the symbolic contents of the archetypes.

If we tap into the archetypal realm of the unconscious, we will be transformed by the act. Our personality will develop toward the ideal of psychological wholeness, and we will move through life with more spontaneity and ease as we will live in alignment with the deep wisdom of our species history.

“[T]ouching the personal unconscious already changes you and touching the collective unconscious changes you all the more: you are a different being, and no longer like the people who have not touched it.”

*Carl Jung, Nietzsche's Zarathustra: Notes of the Seminar Given in 1934–1939*

If, on the other hand, we continue to deny elements of the personal unconscious and remain cut off from the symbols of the collective unconscious, we will remain a petty character, small in psychological stature and limited in what we can accomplish. Furthermore, when a society is infected by a one-sided orientation of consciousness, that is so narrow and distracted, that it shuns the wisdom of the archetypes, this paves the way for social ruin. For the archetypes do not lie dormant when we fail to consciously connect to them, rather they express themselves in destructive ways – they lead to heightened emotional states that drive nations to war, to collective persecutions, and to the mass psychogenic illnesses that wreak havoc on a society, or as Jung warns:

“If an archetype is not brought into reality consciously, there is no guarantee whatever that it will be realized in its favourable form; on the contrary, there is all the more danger of a destructive regression. It seems as if the psyche were endowed with consciousness for the very purpose of preventing such destructive possibilities from happening.”

*Carl Jung, Collected Works Volume 10*